

The Forgotten People State Could Remedy Conditions for Migrant Labor

Today staff writer Dale Wright sums up what he found in working and living as a migrant laborer off and on over a period of six months. And from his experiences with these despairing "forgotten people" he offers suggestions for breaking the vicious circle of their lost hopes.

By DALE WRIGHT,

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I saw it all—the misery and ugliness of the migrant's labor camp and the fields where he worked from Florida to Long Island.

I labored in the same bean and tomato patches with these itinerant crop harvesters. I grubbed in the rich earth with them for potatoes and I chopped cabbage in the same fields.

I shared wretched food with the "stoop" laborer and along with him I was cheated out of my meager wages—work honestly done.

I found that despite legislative efforts and the work of social and religious agencies to improve the lot of the nomadic farm hand and his family, little has been done to better their way of life.

I found that he is forced

to exist in degradation without human dignity. I was touched by the hopelessness I saw in a little child's eyes.

I came away angry and sick from the tomato fields just 30 miles south of the glitter and wealth of Miami Beach. I found the same crude exploitation, the same dreadful living conditions, just 30 miles south of New York City.

The question is what can be done to remedy the plight of the migrant farm worker, whose sweat and toil—yes, and sometimes blood—go into the harvest of this nation's food crops.

These are the things that must be done:

Guarantee the migrant farm worker a fair wage for his labor, if necessary through federal minimum wage laws.

Protect the migrant, the man least able to defend himself, from exploitation by his crew leader, the grower, the shipper, the packer or the processor.

Provide him and his children with an education, so they can better themselves and compete for jobs with others who have that advantage.

Treat and cure his many ailments so that he can do an honest day's work.

Give him a decent place to live where he can care for his family in peace and dignity.

There are before Congress today some plans in this direction. Sen. Harrison A. Williams Jr. (D., N. J.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on migratory labor, has proposed an 11-point package of legislation designed to bring the migrant out of that clump of trees where he lives and into the mainstream of American

life where he can enjoy his rights and privileges as a citizen.

The migration division of the Puerto Rican Labor Department has set up contractual arrangements under which off-shore workers are guaranteed minimum wages and a fixed number of work hours during harvest seasons.

None of these guarantees are available to the vast majority of migrant farm hands—Negroes, West Indians, Mexicans, Cubans, Bermudians, and a sprinkling of whites—who come out of the South or from their respective islands to labor their way

North. They hope to end the summer with enough money to pay their way home. Instead many remain here as relief burdens.

Enlightened New Jersey State should show the way in improving working and living conditions for migrants. Although seven separate agencies are at work on the job, they have only scratched the surface.

The work of these agencies should be consolidated into one all-encompassing unit with adequate powers to enforce all existing laws and press for new remedial legislation. New Jersey often points to

its pioneer role in handling the itinerant crop picker. It is true, there are some laws. But they are not being adequately enforced. I found many examples of laxity in

south and central New Jersey. The migrant farm worker has been tucked away with his family in that inevitable clump of trees and forgotten for so many years that he is unaware that he has rights and privileges as a citizen.

Can anyone expect the sweating, hard-working, underpaid tomato picker who is cheated at every hand to ask for his rights as an American when he does not know they exist?